

WDNR Ruffed Grouse Management Plan Team  
Meeting Minutes  
May 21, 2019  
9:30 AM – 3:30 PM  
Necedah National Wildlife Refuge  
N11385 Headquarters Road  
Necedah, WI 54646

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### **Attendance**

- Mark Witecha, DNR
- Alaina Gerrits, DNR
- Kevyn Quamme, WWF
- Jordan Petchenik, DNR
- Chuck McCullough, DNR
- Gary Zimmer, WI County Forests Association
- Jon Steigerwaldt, RGS
- John Kubisiak, DNR
- Brian Dhuey, DNR
- Janet Brehm, DNR
- Chris Pollentier, DNR
- Dan Eklund, USFS- CNNF

### **Update on Ruffed Grouse (RUGR) hunter survey- Jordan Petchenik**

- Response rate was 70% overall, very high rate compared to other hunter surveys
- Analyses are currently underway
- Final results of the survey will be added as an appendix to the management plan
- Aggregate groups for analyzing survey data could include
  - Years of experience
  - Residency
  - Timing of hunting effort and number of days afield
  - Dog ownership

### **New objectives/edits to management plan objectives based on new survey data**

- When considering earlier closure: based on survey, majority of hunting occurred in October and November
  - Since the harvest is minimal in January we could potentially close season early to balance social and biological needs of the species
    - However, we may face backlash from hunters who do hunt in January
    - Also, if we do not expect an early season closure to help bolster population levels why limit opportunities for hunters?

- Closing the season earlier now will be proactive and will eliminate the need for reactionary emergency closures, which we had to use in 2018 with the concerns over West Nile Virus, as this can create confusion and communication challenges
  - As a reminder: we expanded the season to the end of January approximately 20 years ago to increase opportunities for hunters
  - Creates consistency in regulations with neighboring states
- With all the above considered the team **decided on an early January 1 season closure, zone B dates will not change**
- When considering reorganizing shooting hours:
  - Pheasants are currently the only species that have unique shooting hours (because of stocking)
  - The team would like to avoid species specific shooting hours and based on survey results we decided to **maintain current shooting hours.**
- When considering reducing bag limits from 5 birds/day to 3 birds/day (zone A):
  - Based on survey results there is support for a lower bag limit
  - Biologically there is little to no evidence that proves a lowered bag limit will bolster RUGR populations
    - Especially because 96% of hunters harvested 10 or less birds per hunting season
  - To align with management plan objectives to keep WI a destination state for grouse hunting the team believes decreasing the bag limit compared to other neighboring states (MN and MI allows 5 birds/day) will lead non-resident hunters to chose states outside of WI to grouse hunt, therefore the team decided to **maintain the current bag and possession limits (5 bird/day for zone A, 2 bird/day for zone B, possession limits=3x daily bag)**
- When considering zone restructuring (for zone B to encompass the southern half of the state):
  - A re-zoning effort would correspond with drumming survey results that show there is a large decline in grouse numbers in the south-central and southwest part of the state
  - Hunters preferred the new zoning structure more than the other two options
  - Re-zoning would also correspond to the lack of grouse habitat in the SW portion of the state, especially with the amount of private lands and lack of active timber management in the area
  - Considering the above the team decided to **approve the zone restructuring proposed in the hunter survey (extending zone B to include the southern half of the state) (note: zone restructuring will change the daily bag from 5 to 3 birds/day in the areas of the state that will become newly enclosed in zone B).**
- Overall the team believes that adaptive and proactive management of grouse will be the most beneficial for Wisconsin and will hopefully set an example for neighboring states.
- Communications regarding the RUGR management plan:

- There will be a serious effort made to get the word out regarding the management plan including;
  - Press releases, social media posts, web page postings and newspaper articles
- The management plan has been written in a way to be digestible for the public and will include background information such as natural history and historical management of RUGR.

### **Young Forest Management- Chuck McCullough**

- Strategic wildlife habitat management on public lands
- Goals:
  - Enhance priority forest habitat acres
  - Incorporate grouse/woodcock best management practices (BMPs) into county forest's comprehensive land use plans, and state wildlife area master plans, especially where young forests have potential
- Concepts
  - BMPs are different for different species, therefore we try to utilize representative species as models based on the ecological landscapes where they occur (ie- northern highland zone, southern glacial plains, etc... )
    - BMPs change by ecological landscape and county, they are not one size fits all and are generally based on dominant cover types
    - Because BMPs change by ecological landscape it would be impractical to impose overarching goals (ie- increase x acres of aspen statewide), that is why focal areas are a necessity
  - Arguably two of the most important ecological landscapes for RUGR are the northern forest and forest transitional zone
    - Those areas with most potential (~30 % aspen) should be highest priorities (note: this does not imply young forest management will only occur in high priority areas, it just simply means this is where we will start)
- The most practical place to start will be on working forests (state wildlife areas and county forests that already utilize active timber management)
  - Most likely this will exclude federal lands that have timber harvest plans in place
  - This will also exclude certain old growth forests (ie- COAs, conservation opportunity areas)
- For creating diverse age-stand structure we need to break large blocks of land (>10,000 acres) down into more manageable pieces
  - Use deferred entry system of timber harvest on small areas (10-15 acres) that will create a diverse age structure in stands
  - This will not lead to an overall reduction in allowable cut it will simply defer the cuts (ie- instead of one large 100 acre harvest in 1 year there will be ten smaller 10 acre cuts for 10 years in a row)
  - Must be cognizant of property manager's goals
    - There may be a masterplan already in place

- Offer that this is an opportunity and is not mandatory
  - Recognize there may be some concerns that fluctuations in market prices may not make consistent small harvests practical on all scales (note: current market prices for aspen are stable)
- Using WisFIRS (Wisconsin Forest Inventory and Reporting System) we can determine the areas with at least ~30% aspen cover designated for harvest within 15 years and designate them as high priority areas
- Overall goal: increase age class diversity of aspen on private and public land
  - It may be necessary to hire an LTE forester who can help determine high priority areas on county forests and divide those blocks accordingly
  - County budgets may rely on a certain amount of funds coming from timber harvest annually, although this young forest management plan may make timber harvest more complex it could potentially lead to smaller but more predictable annual payouts from timber sales

### **Finalizing management plan- focal areas and habitat objectives**

- Defining broader priority areas (ie- driftless area, northern forest, etc...) will be beneficial for marketing and creating BMPs
  - How specific will these BMPs be? What will be the level of detail? Will they be categorized by counties or by ecological landscapes?
  - **Plan: create BMPs based on cover types, starting with high priority areas**
    - For example: in landscape X ideal grouse habitat will look like Y (ie- have this % of early successional forest, this % of open areas...) to accomplish these goals use these silvicultural practices (x, y, z)
      - Important to note that not only will species of tree be considered but things like forest structure are important to habitat management as well
      - Creating BMPs within the plan in this fashion allow possibilities to collaborate with different programs already in place like the WI Young Forest Partnership, among others
    - There is potential to create BMPs for different cover types within ecological landscapes (ie- Northern forest zone: cover type 1: mixed aspen oak stands, cover type 2: red maple, etc...)
    - BMPs will help with marketing as they create a “big picture” for the landowner, as well as the forester
      - This is what I want my property to look like, what type of habitat management needs to be employed to make it happen?
    - **Tentative focal areas: northern forest, central forest and driftless regions**
- Specific habitat objectives regarding focal areas will need to be deferred to the future as they rely heavily on partnerships (with county forests, private landowners, etc)
  - There is also a need for additional time to gather data to create ecological landscape specific BMPs

- It will also benefit the team to look more closely at the hunter survey results to incorporate hunter input into the management plan
- Deferring the creation and detailing of specific BMPs will give the RUGR advisory committee more clear role/responsibilities into the future
- The team agreed **that specific BMPs and focal areas will be created within 2 years from approval of the plan**
- The team feels it isn't necessary or feasible to incorporate specific acreage numbers when creating habitat objectives for the RUGR plan (ie- X acres of land needs to be converted to aspen statewide)
  - It may not be feasible because these habitat objectives rely heavily on outside market forces
  - Neighboring states with RUGR management plans do not include specific acreages in habitat plans
  - Certain unforeseen circumstances (ie- natural disasters or climate change) may alter the habitat objectives within the next 10 years
- Can we incorporate drumming survey results into habitat objectives?
  - Can we utilize some sort of buffer around routes with high frequencies of RUGR and then identify in which habitats those routes occur?
    - Could perhaps be a student led project and could help in creating a habitat suitability index (HSI), which is one of the research objectives in the plan
- It is important for the plan to outline opportunities to participate in programs that already exist to create young forests (ie- Wisconsin Young Forest Initiative, RGS grouse management areas)
  - This will provide land managers/owners with demonstrations of how effective results will be and what the process may look like
- It is vital to this management plan to emphasize the fact that young forests are beneficial to a host of wildlife species, not just RUGR
- For reference: outreach and education for this plan is referencing lesson plans for schools and outreach to landowners will fall under habitat objectives

### **Feedback on continuation of drumming surveys**

- The DNR tracks RUGR population trends with drumming surveys and their continuation is vital
- However, on certain routes in the southern part of the state that have not detected a grouse in several consecutive surveys should not have to be continued
  - **Using the new priority areas as a guide, drumming results will be assessed and those routes that have had no grouse detected for extended periods in southeastern WI will be discontinued**
  - There is also a possibility that the Snapshot WI program could continue at least a grouse presence/absence program in those areas where drumming surveys have been discontinued

### **Progress of the plan update**

- All components have been received and effort has been focused on editing, formatting and eliminating redundancies
- Rough draft of the plan will be sent to the team and will be given several weeks for review, simultaneously the wildlife leadership team will look at the objectives and make comments
- The plan will be given to the public in July or August for comment and a statewide tour of public hearings will occur

### **West Nile Virus sampling update**

- Results should become available sometime in July/Early August
- Samples were tested for WNV and EEE (eastern equine encephalitis), EEE will most likely be more prevalent as it is a native virus
- Fall 2019 sampling for WNV will continue and most protocols will be the same
  - Planning to distribute 500 kits
  - If hunters have an unused kit from last year they can use it this year, nothing in the kit expires
  - There is a possibility hunters may be asked to collect feathers (so we can age and sex samples) as this part of the collection data sheet was often left blank by hunters
- Continuing our effort with neighboring states

### **Partner updates**

- Small game hunter survey results are coming in:
  - In general, small game harvest is down
  - Grouse harvest is down (2018 early season closure)
- Drumming surveys are nearing completion
  - In northern forest zones there has been a double digit increase in drumming frequencies
  - In central forests the numbers are roughly the same as last year
  - In the southwest portion of the state the frequencies are the same (barely detectable)
  - Overall grouse are on the upswing right now
- WI county forest association is getting a new executive director
- RGS is set to hire two new forest wildlife staff members pending grant funding